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THE

CHRISTIAN CHANGE.

DESCRIBED BY THE

APOSTLE PETER.

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Among the duties and trials which devolved upon the Apostles, there was no one perhaps more difficult than to make their converts realize the true nature of the change which Christianity required of them. Their own minds had been slow in coming into just views of their Master's kingdom; and now that he was gone from them, and the diffusion of the gospel was entrusted to their hands, they found in the cherished notions of their countrymen, the same kind of difficulties and obstacles, which they themselves had presented to the immediate efficacy of the teaching of Jesus Christ while they walked by his side, and listened to his voice as it spake of themes all new and strange to their ears. And here, as I have said, was one of the hardest labors of the Apostles in spreading Christianity. Persecution and bodily suffering they could endure; distress and privation they could submit to; toil and weariness they cheerfully took for their portion: but prejudices, old opinions, deeply settled feelings, and idle superstitions, were harder than all these to be met or overcome; inasmuch as it is more difficult to dislodge a difficulty that has its seat in the mind, than to

confront or subdue one which affects only outward circumstances.

These observations are made with reference to a passage in the writings of the Apostle Peter, on which I propose to offer a few plain comments and remarks. It is this: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the spirit, unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently; being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever."*

Here, we observe, the Apostle addresses those to whom he writes, as "being purified by obeying the truth." Now in this, there is doubtless an allusion to a fond and foolish conceit, which the Jews entertained, of an efficacy in certain outward rites among the Mosaic institutions. A comparison is implied, drawn from the ablutions, as the washing of the body and of garments, which the ceremonial law enjoined on certain occasions. The Jews became so narrow in their views and rested so much in external things, as to ascribe a great religious importance or efficacy to these outward cleansings. Such poor notions as these the Apostle intended to rebuke in the passage now before us. "Seeing ye have purified yourselves" — How? by the lustral waters of the Mosaic ceremonies? do you think they would purify you? No: but "seeing ye have purified your souls *in obeying the truth,*" that is, christian truth, — in receiving it to your hearts, and making it the sanctifier of your inward man. *This* is the true purification,— that which comes from the use of spiritual means, not that which you may imagine

* 1 Peter i, 22, 23.

to proceed from the practices prescribed, as forms or precautions, in the Mosaic law.

Again; the Apostle says — "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible." Here likewise is probably a reference to one of the pernicious mistakes prevalent among the people of Judea. It is well known, that they thought a great deal of being descended from ancestors whom they supposed to stand peculiarly high in the favor of God, especially the most distinguished of them, Abraham. The piety and merit of such a progenitor, they imagined, were reflected down or imputed to his posterity; so that they who were born of such a father had extraordinary claims on the favor of heaven, with but little, if any, regard to the personal qualifications of obedience and righteousness. Now this folly the sacred writer designates by calling it "being born of corruptible seed;" and in opposition to it he places the true christian pedigree, (if I may use the word in this figurative sense,) which consists in being born of "incorruptible seed,"— that is, in coming into a new state of mind and heart, under the power of moral influences. The allusion and the contrast here are the same as in that passage in which those are described who "were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God,"*— and likewise as in our Saviour's declaration to Nicodemus — "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit."† The empty boast of being a descendant from Abraham is contrasted with the substantial benefit, the true happiness,

* John i. 13. † John iii, 6.

of being born into a new moral life under the influence of the spirit of the Gospel.

Such are the allusions in the passage before us which seem to require explanation. I now proceed to offer a few remarks on the effect produced by Christianity on the character of man as described in these words of the Apostle.

1. It is described as a *purification, wrought by odedience to the truth.* It is no profession ; it is no taking of a name upon ourselves ; it is not that sort of zeal which satisfies itself with crying out, " Lord, Lord." No : it is a moral purifying; it is a washing away of the stains which sin and folly had imprinted on the heart ; it is the cleansing of the temple of man's spirit, that it may be prepared for the presence and the service of God. So far as this is done, the design of the gospel is accomplished in us. So far as this is not done, the design of the gospel fails ; and it would have been almost as well for us individually, if Jesus Christ had never lived, or taught, or died, or rose from the dead. The purity here represented as the true effect of christian principles consists in giving a *religious* character to the thoughts, and motives, and feelings. Its demands will not be satisfied with simply abstaining from open or concealed iniquity ; they will not be satisfied with that harmless sobriety of character which enables us to stand reputably with our fellow-men ; nor will they be satisfied with an attendance, however exact, upon the forms in which Christianity is set forth to engage the attention and excite the interest of mankind. I fear very much, that with things like these, the most of us persuade ourselves to rest contented, and thus come far short of that standard which he who spake as man never spake lived

died and o establish. When in some hour of calm reflection, of searching self-examination, we take the matter seriously in hand, and consider what Christianity requires and what it purposes to accomplish, we must feel, we *do* feel, how very poor and defective are the approaches we make to a real acquaintance with its spirit. If we could but once know it as it is, and open our hearts, and make room for it, and take it there as it is, we should be like those who have left the chill and the darkness of a cavern, and have come out into the broad light and the cheerful warmth of day.

This purification consists, as I have said, in giving a *religious* character to the thoughts and feelings. And by this I mean, that it consists in binding the soul to God by all the holy ties of dependence, thankfulness, and obligation, — in causing the heart to feel habitually and naturally the presence of religious truth, just as we feel the sweet influences of the breeze that fans the cheek and keeps in motion the organs of life, — in linking fast to the mind the great considerations relating to the future and everlasting world, so that it can never long wander away from them. All this is doubtless effected but very imperfectly even in the best men ; but in greater or less degrees it is and must be effected. They will have frequent occasion to lament the remains of corruption in their hearts . they will grieve for the unfaithfulness of their services, and for the uncleanness that still cleaves to their moral constitution. Yet they will bless God that the spirit of christian purity is not a stranger to their souls : and they will strive and pray that having found an entrance there, it may spread from one point to another, till the whole moral nature in a better world shall be sur-

rounded and embalmed by its influence. The mind of man may become what our Saviour found the temple at Jerusalem, — a den of thieves; and as he drove out those who profaned the holy place with their merchandize, so his religion may expel the corrupters of our moral nature, and make the spirit of man what God designed it to be,— a house of prayer, — that is, the residence of purity. When your thoughts and feelings turn to the great Father of light, as the needle points to the pole, however it may by constraint be turned aside, and when your life bears witness that the presence of the great truths of eternity is about your heart, then you know by your own experience what is meant by the christian purifying.

The Apostle points out the *source* of this purification, when he tells us it comes from "obeying the truth through the spirit,"— that is, from obedience to that truth which manifests its power by spiritual influences. It is necessary to observe this particularly, because some persons, from ignorance, mistake, or indolence, persuade themselves that this purifying of the heart is a mysterious and special operation of God, in which they themselves have little or nothing to do. But you will observe, the Apostle Peter says nothing like this. He derives this purity from obeying God's truth, as the effect in any case comes from the cause. It is not more certain that water will cleanse the body, than it is that the inward and hearty reception of religious truth will cleanse the soul. It is endowed by God with this vital power of promoting the moral health of man; and it remains with ourselves to say, whether this divine gift shall lie by us neglected or be taken up and used for the purposes of spiritual life and purity. It is the instrument by which the power of heaven operates:

but it operates only on such as are disposed to be its subjects. I rejoice to believe that God is the original source of all that moral purifying, which the heart receives from Christianity. So, too, it is God who sustains our bodies. But *how* is this done? Why, through the instrumentality of the food which his bounty provides for us. And just so, it is God who purifies the human soul. But *how?* Why, through the instrumentality of our obedience to that divine truth which He has set before us.

Further; this truth which we are to obey in order that we may be pure, is not to be sought chiefly among the peculiar doctrines of this or that sect, the distinguishing opinions of this or that party, which their respective champions are apt to think all important, and essential to the name and very character of a Christian. No; the purifying truth is to be found in those plain and manifest instructions of spiritual wisdom, the direct object of which is to make us good. This is soul-purifying and soul-saving truth; and we need look no further to ask men what we shall believe, or to what creed or standard of faith we shall conform. The great central principles of Christianity have a healing and cleansing power, which no time and no circumstances can impair. Whatever makes man wise not for this world only, but for the everlasting world, whatever pours consolation into the wounded heart, gives strength for duty, and leads right onward in the path to heaven, — whatever is of this character belongs essentially to that truth, by obeying which we are purified: everything of this sort is the same yesterday, today, and forever; everything of this sort is imbedded in the very heart of the gospel. We are not sufficiently aware that the only influences which can prepare us for eternity, or

which we can carry onward in eternity, are practical influences. All good men have the same moral training for heaven, however different may be the modes in which they have held communion with the Infinite Spirit; and they will all at length confess that these everlasting parts of their religion are the substance, to which the other parts bear the same relation as the scaffolding does to the building around which it is raised.

Thus we see what the channel is, in which God conveys spiritual influences. The sacred writer expressly affirms that it is through obedience to the truth. Why, then, should we wait in supine idleness, for the Most High to show forth his power in calling us out of darkness into light? Why should we listen to the voice of fanatical excitement, which tells us that a hand must be reached forth from heaven to us individually, in order to place us on a rock of safety? Is not God's truth with us? Does it not surround us like the light and air of heaven? And is not this the instrument, by which the soul is to be purified? Take then this truth to your heart, and you shall know for yourself that it has the power of giving health to the soul. Place yourself under the tuition of the gospel of Christ. Learn from his instructions the vast meaning there is in religion, and you will hear its voice and see its tokens in what you might otherwise pass by as cheap or trivial, — in the works of nature under your eye or around your walks, in the duties of the fireside, and in all the relations and affections of home. Wherever you go, wherever you turn, a light will be struck out for you, which, if followed with a devout spirit, will surely lead to God and heaven.

2. The change produced by Christianity is described by the Apostle as a "being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible." Here we have a figure of speech, very striking, and, if understood in its true sense, very happy. The transformation which the thoughtless or the sinful man passes through in becoming a practical Christian, is represented by his receiving another birth besides his natural birth. This or a kindred mode of speaking is common in the Christian Scriptures. Nor is it confined to them. It has prevailed more or less in other religions, especially in the religions of the Eastern parts of the world. A distinguished writer, in speaking of the Hindoo faith, observes that "the most remarkable point of resemblance between the Indian and the Christian doctrines lies in the absolute identity of conception, with which both describe the process of regeneration. In the Indian creed, exactly as in our own, so soon as the soul becomes touched with the love of divine things, it is supposed to drop at once its life contaminated by sin, and, as the phœnix rises from its ashes, to spring at once into the possession of a new and purified existence. So universal is the prevalence of this idea among the Indians, that the soul so purified is said by the Brahmins, (with the same words and the same meaning familiar to ourselves) to be *new-born*."* I quote this only as an illustration of the fact, that the analogy between coming into natural life and coming into moral life is so obvious, that it has suggested itself to different nations under different religions, and has given rise among them to the same figurative mode of describing the power of religious influence over man.

The meaning of this way of speaking may be express-

* Schlegel's Lectures on the History of Literature, I. 225.

ed summarily by saying, that the man who was once a stranger to vital Christianity, but has now taken it to his heart and lives under its influence, is as much a different man from what he was before, as if he had passed into a new form of existence by going through a new birth. This does not imply that the nature which God originally gave to man must be displaced as a wicked and corrupt thing, but that the tendencies and propensities which that nature had been suffered to receive are so entirely altered, that the man is no longer the same being that he was. Our nature has originally no moral character, neither good nor bad, — but only a capacity for receiving such a character. It may be described by calling it an instrument given to us to be used, and which may be used either well or ill. The same faculties, the same power of the will, the same affections, which, when fixed upon sinful objects or directed in a wrong course, carry it headlong in depravity, may, when attached to pure objects or guided in a virtuous course, raise it to a high elevation of piety and spiritual improvement. In itself it is capable of being a great and glorious thing; but man may make it — as, alas! he often does — a corrupt and polluted thing. Suppose now a case in which this nature has been lost in the mazes of hurtful error, or sunk in the depths of sin, — suppose it to have become poor, frivolous, cramped, or defiled in the service of folly and wickedness; and then suppose it, through the instrumentality of the momentous and everlasting truths of religion, to be touched with heavenly influences, to be brought out of its degradation and slavery into the light, liberty, and happiness of the children of God, — to become, in short, virtuous, pure, and spiritualized. May

not such a change be fitly described by saying, that the individual has been *born again?* His introduction into this world was his natural birth; and is not his introduction into a new moral world another and better birth? What a great change is effected, when a man is reformed even from a single vice, and brought into the opposite virtue! And if we suppose this change to become general, and the whole moral nature to be rescued from the prevalent dominion of sin, and placed under the sanctifying power of religious principle, we shall perceive that the language, which describes this renovation as *a new birth,* is not in the least degree extravagant or inappropriate. No; thus explained, there is a deep and solemn meaning in it. And however fanaticism may abuse such expressions and draw from them unwarrantable consequences or representations, as it has done and is doing now, still there is no fact more true or more solemn than the moral regeneration of the human heart by christian truth and under christian principles.

We hear or read a great deal at the present day about revivals, about conversion, and about being born again. With many these seem to be the very watchwords of religion. Perhaps no terms in our language are used in a more random and confused manner than these. Among the multitudes, by whom they are repeated from mouth to mouth as if there were a sort of magical charm in them, how few pause to consider what they really mean,—how few consider whether to be the subject of a revival, and to be a truly good man, signify one and the same thing. That a great change is produced by the gospel upon those who heartily receive it, no one, I suppose, will deny. But it is a moral change, a change by which the mind is

enlightened and the heart turned from evil to good, which manifests its existence by gradual, increasing, and lasting effects upon the character, by producing the peaceable fruits of righteousness and charity in the temper, disposition, and habits of the individual. Such a change as this you may call a revival, a regeneration, a new birth, a conversion, — or you may call it moral advancement, practical improvement in the christian life, progress in holiness. The name makes no difference, if you understand yourself and are understood by others. The substance is there, and that is enough. But all the words you can heap up, borrowed from the language of sectarian theology, will never compensate for the want of the thing itself, — that is, for the want of real christian improvement in heart and life.

This regenerating power, the Apostle tells us, comes from "the word of God which liveth and abideth forever;" from no arts, no machinery, no contrivances of man, but from that fountain of moral influence opened by God, which abideth forever. This is the prerogative of divine truth, that it is eternal and unchangeable. Man, with all his devices and his works, passes away. The material universe, with its gorgeous array of suns and worlds, grows old. The contrivances by which man seeks to act upon and stimulate the passions of his fellow-men, and to stir up a temporary swell of feeling for the sake of excitement or notoriety, — all these become stale, unprofitable, and worse than useless. But the truth of God liveth and abideth forever. Yes, there it is, shining forth, the sun of the moral world. There it ever has been. There it ever will be. And as the generations of men come and go in quick succession, blessed are they who

have felt its warmth, and have walked heavenward in its light!

As the result of this moral regeneration, the Apostle inculcates upon his brethren this charge — "see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently." The natural fruit of the operation of christian truth on the heart is enlarged, generous, and sincere love; the love of all that is good, pure, and beautiful in God's universe, which comes upon the soul like the still sunshine of a calm and gentle day upon one, who reposes in silence and solitude; that compassion for those who wander from the path of life into the ways of sin, which springs from a full and affecting sense of the deadly evil of sin, and of the misery which is seen in its course. The love, which looks from man up to God, and sees the connecting line between them, which delights in the good of a fellow immortal, wherever he may be found, which rejoices to see him ascending in the path of virtue and of spiritual life, and blesses God for it, and which weeps, as angels do, to see him going to degradation and ruin at the bidding of bad passions and depraved propensities; — this is the love that results from purification through the truth of God which liveth and abideth forever.

These are some of the leading considerations, to which we are led by the Apostle Peter's description of the nature and efficacy of christian truth. We should open our minds to these topics, as it becomes those to do who feel an interest in their immortal welfare. At a period like the present, when so much is said, and sometimes so wildly and foolishly, on these subjects, it is peculiarly important for us to look at them in a serious spirit and on their practical side, that we may not be led astray by

the misguided zeal of the fanatic on the one hand, nor by the jeers and taunts of the scoffer on the other. Let us not for a moment lose sight of the great fact, that there is such a thing as a purifying and regenerating power in our religion, however much or frequently it may be misunderstood or abused. Be not carried away by the noisy and imposing excitement, that resembles the flames painted on pictures, which, while they glare and look red, give no warmth and no light. But at the same time, prize, yea, prize above all things, the renovating influences of true religion. She comes to you in all the gentleness and depth of her quiet power, and beseeches you, for the love you bear to your own souls, to take her counsels and to hold fast her instructions. She entreats you, as we would entreat one whom we love, to go with her, and choose those ways which are pleasantness, and those paths which are peace. Will you say nay to her invitations? Will you tell her that you will have none of her counsels, and that you choose not her ways? You can do so, if you will. But pause first, and think of the consequences; think of the account you must render for resolving whom you will serve. Life and death, happiness and misery are before us; and we have an election to make between them. Shall it not be our most fervent prayer, the object of our most earnest striving, that we may know by our own experience the purifying and renovating power of christian truth, that we may be born of that incorruptible seed, the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever?